

## CHAPTER 9: WHO IS JESUS OF NAZARETH?

“He asked his disciples, ‘Who do men say that I am?’ And they told him, ‘John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.’ And he asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ.’ ” (Mark 8:27–29)

If we do not claim that Jesus is God, then how do we explain his importance? How do we interpret the fact of his centrality to our faith? What concepts or images do we use? Who then do we say that he is? Having rejected the title of “God the Son”, it is appropriate to begin by examining the other commonly used traditional titles: Savior, Lord and Master, Son of God, Messiah, and Christ.

### 1. Savior of the World

But when Christ appeared as a high priest . . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:11–14)

This passage contains the combination of Jesus’ nature (as sinless) and role (as sacrifice) that is central to the traditional idea of Jesus as Savior: he was a person without sin, and by offering himself up in our place as a perfect sacrifice he has secured salvation for those who join themselves to him by faith. We are saved from sin and death by his blood, so he is our Savior.

We can see that this might make sense to someone brought up in the ancient Jewish tradition in which an unblemished animal was sacrificed to God to make atonement for the sins of the people, and in which the

iniquities of Israel were all put on the head of a goat which was then driven out into the wilderness, taking the people's sins with it. And certainly we are familiar with this view as a traditional Christian theme: Jesus died for our sins. He did this so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. The implication of this is that without Jesus' death we could *not* be forgiven. Sometimes this is made explicit: God could not or would not forgive us until the blameless Jesus took our sins upon himself and suffered in our stead.

This may not make much sense to those of us who don't sacrifice other living things to atone for our sins. Entirely aside from this, however, this view that Jesus is the Savior because he saved us from eternal punishment by dying for our sins is untenable for three reasons.

First and foremost, it gives us a repugnant and unchristian picture of God. If God demanded the death of an innocent and blameless person before forgiving anybody, if God turned away even from those who repented until someone *else* suffered for their sins, if God demanded the pain and blood of the cross before admitting anyone into right relationship . . . what kind of blood-thirsty, sadistic being would this be? This is not a God of love or even a God of justice. This is a picture of some demonic pagan deity, not the God whose love and forgiveness were preached by Jesus of Nazareth, who reached out first and foremost to those who were sinners.

Secondly, this idea of Jesus as Savior presents a despicable and unbiblical view of humankind. It maintains that as sinful men and women we are so fallen and degenerate and unworthy as to be totally without hope of reconciliation with God, unless God in a gracious act of divine imagination pretends that our sinfulness has disappeared, that it has somehow been removed by the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. (This, when you get right down to it, is the meaning of justification through grace.) Now, we must certainly admit that people are capable of great evil. But just as certainly, to think of people as worthless in the eyes of God is directly to contradict the insights of the great prophets, the teaching that "God so loved the world", and Jesus' understanding of the great worth of each and every human being.

Thirdly, the idea that there could be no forgiveness until Jesus saved us by dying as a sacrifice on our behalf is contradicted by the simple fact that Jesus himself proclaimed forgiveness during his own lifetime. He didn't tell people that they were forgiven "as of Passover the year after next" or that they were worthless and without hope until the divine bloodlust had been satisfied. He simply said, "Your sins are forgiven." Right then and there. And I suspect he knew what he was about.

Now it is no doubt true that there are people who call Jesus "Savior" who do not think of him as substituting for us on the cross to propitiate a bloodthirsty deity. But for me the title of "Savior" is so tied up with a

repugnant picture of God and with an unchristian view of humanity as totally worthless, that I just cannot accept this as a suitable title for Jesus of Nazareth.

## 2. Lord and Master

“Lord” and “master” are both terms that were widely used in society until recent centuries. Students would address teachers this way, slaves their owners, and servants their employers. Those of lower social status would address those of higher status this way, whether a serf to a local landowner or a duke to a king.

These titles have virtually disappeared from use in the modern democracies. I doubt that any American would ever call *anyone* “lord” or “master”. So besides having a certain antiquarian charm, applying these titles to Jesus would have two benefits: it would attribute a unique status to Jesus, since we no longer use these of anyone else. And it would give us a little humility on our own part, which we must confess would do many of us Americans some good.

I have a trio of qualms, however, which prevents me from being comfortable with this pair of titles (and also from speaking of Jesus as “king”). The first qualm is based on our need to encourage our own servanthood. We can do this by lifting up and emphasizing the servanthood of Jesus. But we cannot emphasize his servanthood by calling him lord and master! These are titles which connote power and status and domination of others, not the loving gift of oneself for these others.

The second qualm has to do with how we think of ourselves if we call Jesus—or anyone—our lord and master. The implication of having a lord or master is that you must obey this person. You act out of obedience, with little or no real choice in the matter. To surrender your will in this way is to surrender your decision-making and so also your responsibility. But this we cannot do. In spite of all the hymns which laud the surrender of our wills to God, we ought to do what is right not just because some outside power makes us, but because of a decision on our own part to do so, because of inward conviction and principle and faith. (Is it just my imagination or do many people who call Jesus “lord and master” shy away from discussions with those of other views because—acting in obedience to someone else’s interpretation of Jesus—they have no reasoned convictions of their own?)

My third qualm has to do with the suitability of these two titles for our modern day and age. We think today in terms of democracy, while the Bible uses the imagery of tyranny (this is, after all, what we would call a ruling monarch). We think in terms of liberty, equality, representative government, popular elections, and office holders as public servants.

The Bible often couches its message in the metaphor of kingship, hierarchy, obedience, masters and slaves.

Assuredly, we need to speak of the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. But it does not seem appropriate to speak of this as the authority of a “lord” or “master”, imposed from above us and outside us. Rather we need a way of speaking of Jesus’ authority that recognizes that this authority is based on the position we give him in our internal value system. We need to give due credit to our part in giving him this authority, and so explain it in a way in keeping with our democratic heritage.

### 3. Son of God

I am rather fond of this title for Jesus. It has an amiable vagueness about it because of the wide range of meanings that have been given to it. “Son of God” can mean “God the Son”, that is, the second person of the Trinity, God incarnate. It can also mean (as it is used at times in the New Testament) anyone who is a faithful follower of God. Or it can mean anything in between. Which is what most people seem to mean by it: to call Jesus the son of God is to say that he is somehow special, without specifying too precisely in just what way. So we can all happily agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the son of God, each of us with our own different idea of what this means.

However, while this gives us a vague common denominator which we can all use, by virtue of this same vagueness it isn’t much help in saying who Jesus is. Since we have chosen not to claim that Jesus is divine, it isn’t clear that being a son of God distinguishes him from a number of other people.

### 4. Messiah

This is the title that was recognized by his followers early on—though probably not until after Easter—as the determinative answer to the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” The other titles might be seen as appropriate, and they might contribute to the understanding of Jesus, but the Messiah is who he was. This became such an integral part of his identity that only a few decades after his death this Jewish title was used in its Greek translation—Christ—as part of Jesus’ proper name.

Identifying Jesus as the Messiah seems only natural to many of us. We have assimilated the common view that the whole of the Old Testament points to the coming of the Messiah, and that its predictions and expectations were completely and obviously fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This view, however, is overly simplistic on some points and just plain wrong on others.

For one thing, the Messiah was not the only person expected or hoped for by first century Jews. There were other titles available, other comings prophesied both in the Old Testament and more recently. Some looked for the coming of “the Son of Man”, others for the return of Moses or Elijah, others for someone else altogether.

For another thing, those who did look for the Messiah expected a very different kind of person than Jesus of Nazareth. The Messiah was supposed to accomplish different things than Jesus did. The Messiah was not only to be the son (that is, descendent) of David. He was also to occupy the throne of David and re-establish David’s kingdom. For example, look at Chapters 9 and 11 of Isaiah. We tend to ignore certain parts of these when we read them around Christmas.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and *the government* will be upon his shoulders . . . Of the increase of *his government* and of peace there will be no end, *upon the throne of David and over his kingdom*. (Isaiah 9:6–7. Italics added.)

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him . . . and *he shall smite the earth* with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips *he shall slay the wicked*. (Isaiah 11:1–2a, 4b. Italics added.)

And later in Chapter 11 it speaks of the return of all the Jews from foreign lands and their revenge on their neighbors.

Jesus, you recall, had neither throne nor government. He did not slay the wicked. He did not rally people to the battle cry of “liberty, empire and vengeance!” No wonder the vast majority of his contemporaries couldn’t accept him as the Messiah. He didn’t even drive out the Romans! Worse yet, he didn’t even hate them. And he ate with tax collectors!

The wonder isn’t that most people didn’t accept Jesus as the Messiah. The wonder is that his disciples decided that this is, after all, who he was. They were convinced that Jesus was beyond a doubt the one who was to come. If he didn’t meet people’s expectations, then these expectations were wrong. The reality of God’s messenger would naturally burst beyond the bounds of human expectation. And the disciples knew the impact of Jesus was so great that titles could not define him, but rather his reality would determine the true meaning of any titles used of him. So if the Messiah was pre-eminent among those who were prophesied, then Jesus must be the Messiah, giving new meaning to this title in his person and ministry<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>One interesting hypothesis as to how this particular title came to be attached to Jesus gives the credit to Pontius Pilate. Pilate, from what we know of him, was arrogant and hateful even for a Roman governor. Apparently in order to insult the Jews, he had a sign put on the cross that read “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”. Now “King of the Jews” was a title

In spite of this conviction on the part of his disciples that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, this does not seem to me the most suitable identification for him. "Messiah" is a title with a long history that we cannot ignore. The "Son of David" was to be a king, a warrior, and triumphant in worldly terms. Jesus of Nazareth was none of these. Far too often we forget this. Whenever we identify him with the lordly and powerful of this world, whenever we think of him as king, we cloud our understanding of the man from Galilee whose greatness lay in his giving of himself and his being a servant to others.

## 5. The Christ

"Christ" is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word "Messiah". Nevertheless, it does not have the same connotation for us. Because in our translations of the Bible we find "Christ" only in the New Testament, we do not identify it with the Old Testament warrior-king. In fact, "Christ" became so closely identified with Jesus of Nazareth that it became in actual usage a part of his proper name. It has for most people no other meaning than to name this particular person<sup>2</sup>, though there may be an awareness that this part of his name means that there is something special about him.

"Christ" is also the title that gave us Christians our name. Because of this, and because of its unique association with Jesus, and because of the fact that it is relatively free of traditional meaning, this is the title that I choose to identify Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Christ.

I do not wish to call him Savior, Lord, Master, or Messiah. I do not find these to be appropriate or helpful. Instead, I acknowledge him to be the Christ. And I recognize that in so doing I am taking what had become in practice a name and am rehabilitating it as a title. I also freely admit that one of my reasons for doing this is that, because of a long lapse in its use as a title, "Christ" is more open than the others to being given new meaning.

I acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ. What do I mean by this? I do *not* mean that I believe him to be divine, or that he was without sin, or even that he was necessarily the wisest and best of all people. Rather, I define "the Christ" in a functional manner. That is, I identify Jesus as the Christ by the function or role that he plays for me. As long as he fulfills this function I don't need to claim that he was born

identified with the Messiah, and since Jesus was crucified as the Messiah, this theory goes, his disciples concluded that he was raised as the Messiah.

<sup>2</sup>This was not always the case. At one point early in Church history "Christ" was equated with the divine Logos, and there was some disagreement as to how this was related to the man Jesus. But this has long since ceased to be a common understanding.

of a virgin or was specially chosen by God, that he healed the sick or was raised from the dead. I may believe one or more of these—and in fact I probably do—but they are not necessary in order to identify Jesus as the Christ.

When I say that Jesus is the Christ, I mean to claim that this person is the one through whom we as Christians focus our understanding and our faith. He is the one whose life and message are central to our understanding of God and reality, the one whose teaching gives direction to our lives, and the one whose example of love and right relation and concern for others informs our attitudes and actions.

In the next chapter I will explain how the identification of Jesus as the Christ through this functional interpretation is indisputable, sufficient, and even sacred.